PATTERNS OF POWER

A COMPARATIVE ESSAY

The Other Book

on two conquest settlements a thousand years and five thousand miles apart that paid their armies out of one ledger and their rulers out of another — and on what the existence of the second ledger proves about how much the men at the top understood

DAMASCUS 661 · BEIJING 1644

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with Claude (Anthropic)

Held as tested, not revealed.

The question Muʿāwiya asked

Some time after the Sasanian empire fell, the founder of the Umayyad dynasty made an enquiry. He wanted to know where the register of the Persian crown lands was kept.

Consider what a strange question that is for the head of a religious movement to be asking, and then consider that it is not strange at all. The King of Kings had held personal domains, distinct from the taxed lands of his subjects, and a dynasty overthrown in the field does not carry its property deeds into exile. Somewhere there was a book listing what those estates were and where. Muʿāwiya wanted it, and the reports say he took a close and specific interest in getting the lands back.

He was not looking for souls. He already had the doctrine — that was the inheritance he had come into by a route this collection has described elsewhere, and it was doing its work. What he was looking for was the previous apex's ledger, because he understood something about his own position that is worth spending an essay on: that the men he had to pay and the wealth he had to keep were two different problems, and that solving them out of the same book would eventually destroy him.

He was right about the first half. He never solved the second half, and the failure to solve it is a substantial part of why his dynasty lasted eighty-nine years.

A thousand years later and five thousand miles east, a court that had never heard of him made the same two moves and got the second one right.

The same refusal

Begin with what both conquests declined to do, because it is the more surprising half and the two refusals are almost identical.

In the 630s the Arab armies took the Sawad of southern Iraq, the richest agricultural land in the world they had conquered. The soldiers who had won at Qādisiyya expected the ordinary treatment: the army takes the spoil, four-fifths to the men who fought. The tradition is unanimous that ʿUmar refused, that he was pressed hard, and that the argument was bitter. The land stayed with the people cultivating it; the land tax went to the treasury; and the treasury paid the soldiers a stipend recorded against their names in a register.

In the 1640s the Manchu banner armies took an empire whose registered arable ran to hundreds of millions of *mu*. They enclosed a ring of it around Beijing — something over sixteen million *mu*, a large transfer to the districts that suffered it and a small fraction of the whole — and stopped. The rest stayed in Chinese hands under Chinese title, at a tax rate the new dynasty deliberately reset to pre-war levels. And the banner soldier was paid a stipend: three taels a month and forty-six *hu* of grain a year for a cavalryman, recorded against his name in a company roll.

Both conquests, then, converted a conquering army into a stipendiary class rather than a landed one, and both did it over the objections or against the expectations of the men concerned.

The reason usually given, in both traditions, is competence, and it is a real reason. A working revenue machine is a delicate object. Dividing the Sawad among Arab tribesmen who did not know how to run Mesopotamian irrigation would have destroyed the yield inside a generation; the Sasanian cadastre, the assessment rates and the *dihqān* collectors were worth more intact than any share of them would have been. The Qing faced the same arithmetic against an even more elaborate machine — registers, magistrates, a grain-tribute fleet, a canal — and left it running.

But there is a second reason, and neither tradition states it, because nobody has to state a thing in order to act on it.

A soldier who holds a share of the land has something the ruler cannot take back without a war. A soldier who holds an entry in a register has something the ruler can take back with a pen.

Both settlements discovered this and both used it. In 701, after the Iraqi armies rose, they were not defeated into submission and then disarmed man by man; they were struck off the roll, and a province's military class ceased to exist as a claimant without a further battle. In the eighteenth century, when the banner stipend roll had outgrown the revenue that fed it, the Qing court did not reduce the stipend. It reduced the caste — ordering Han bannermen enrolled after 1644 out of the banners, and shrinking the class to fit the money.

Two states, no contact, one instrument: a hereditary military caste paid in claims rather than things, and therefore cullable by clerk.

The other book

Now the half of the arrangement that neither state advertised, and which is the reason for this essay.

The men who kept the first register were building a second kind of holding entirely, of the opposite legal character.

In the caliphate, the Sasanian royal domains — the *ṣawāfī* — did not go into the fund the stipends were paid from. They went to the caliph. Portions were granted out to members of the ruling family and their clients as *qaṭā'i'*, and those grants had two features that the stipend did not: they were **hereditary**, passing as property to heirs by inheritance, and they were assessed at the lower rate, the tithe, rather than at the land tax borne by the fields around them. Meanwhile in Syria — the province that supplied the army and the dynasty both — the caliphs and princes built somewhere in the region of twenty to thirty rural estates across the steppe, walled agricultural enclosures with dams, reservoirs and olive-oil installations, which are still standing.

In the Qing empire, the Imperial Household Department was not a department of state. It was the emperor's private establishment, staffed by bondservants of the upper banners rather than by degree-holders, and it ran the palace workshops, the Jiangnan silk manufactories, the trade in ginseng and furs and jade, interest-bearing loans to merchants, and a substantial share of the customs. Confiscated fortunes of convicted officials flowed to it rather than to the Board of Revenue. And its defining feature was jurisdictional: its revenues were deliberately maintained beyond the Board's auditing reach. The Board audited every province in the empire in exhaustive detail. It did not audit this.

Set the two settlements out and the symmetry is exact.

The conquest caste, in both cases, holds a **claim**: recorded against a name, in a book the payer keeps, revisable at the payer's discretion, extinguished at death — the Egyptian papyri show the Umayyad stipend registers recording death dates, because a claim against a name dies when the name does — and renewed only by the payer's further act.

The ruling house, in both cases, holds a **thing**: heritable, lightly taxed or untaxed, outside the register, and in an account the state's own auditors could not reach.

Whether either arrangement was designed as a whole, or accumulated out of decisions each defensible on its own, is not recoverable and is not the question. What is on the record is the arrangement, and the arrangement runs one way in every particular.

What the filing system confesses

There is a persistent and comfortable idea that rulers are as much inside their own arrangements as everyone else — that they believe the ideology they preach, mistake their interests for the common good, and cannot see the machinery any more clearly than the peasant can.

This collection does not assert that and does not assert its opposite. The rule is to **bracket sincerity**, because an inner state is unrecoverable and no evidence available to a historian can settle it. We do not know what Muʿāwiya thought about the revelation, or what the Kangxi emperor thought about Heaven, and pronouncing on either would be a claim dressed as a finding.

What can be recovered is conduct, and conduct is the only evidence this essay needs — because belief about doctrine and understanding of mechanism are separate questions, and only the second one is being asked here. A man may hold his creed with total conviction and still know exactly what a revocable claim is worth against a heritable estate. The two propositions do not touch. So the question is not whether these men believed what they said. It is whether they understood what they were building, and on that the record is not ambiguous at all.

You cannot pay your army in revocable entitlements and yourself in heritable land by accident. The two holdings differ in every legal particular that matters — transmission, revocability, assessment, and which book they are written in — and each difference runs the same way. A man who arranges that has demonstrated, in his own accounting, that he knows precisely what the difference between a claim and a thing is, and that he would rather his soldiers held the first and he held the second.

The filing system is a signed confession of comprehension. It is more reliable than any statement of intention, because nobody wrote it to be read.

Muʿāwiya's enquiry is the same evidence in its purest form. A man who has inherited a revelation and goes looking for a tax register has told you which of the two he expected to secure his family, and he has told you it in the most reliable way available — by what

he did with his own time. Whatever he held privately about the doctrine, and this essay takes no position on it, he was not confused about its function: it was the reason he commanded anything at all, and it was also, as this collection has argued elsewhere, the leash that eventually strangled his house. What his conduct establishes is that he knew a doctrine is a thing you spend and an estate is a thing you keep.

And the Qing court knew it too, well enough to build an entire parallel bureaucracy around the distinction and to place the boundary between the two treasuries exactly where the boundary of the settlement ran: bondservants of the conquest caste on one side, Han degree-holders on the other, and an audit that stopped at the line.

The general form of the rule is worth stating, because the temptation to vouch for interiors runs in both directions and both are errors. Do not claim that the men at the top believed their own doctrine. Do not claim that they did not. **Bracket it, and read the arrangements instead** — because an arrangement is a decision that survives in the record, and a conviction is not. The founders of a republic that declared all men equal while running on chattel slavery, and the legislators who rebuilt something very close to slavery within a few years of its abolition, did not arrive at those arrangements through inattention. Neither did any of the men in this essay. People who command armies and dispose of provinces are not confused about what they are doing, whatever else they may also believe while doing it.

Why this rhymes rather than repeats

The obvious question is whether one learned from the other, and the answer is plainly no. Muʿāwiya had no notion that China existed in any form that would have been useful to him. Dorgon had never heard of the *ṣawāfī*. There is no transmission and there is no common tradition — one settlement is a Semitic-language tribal confederation running a captured Persian cadastre, the other a Tungusic banner state running a captured Chinese one.

What there is, is a position, and the position poses a problem with a small number of good answers.

The problem is this. You are a small group that has just captured a large, working, agrarian revenue machine. You have an armed following that expects payment and outnumbers you many times over. You cannot pay them out of a machine you have destroyed, so you cannot let them divide it. You therefore have to pay them out of the

flow, which means creating a register — and the moment you create a register you have created an instrument that can be closed, which is your best protection against the men you have just armed. But that same instrument is pointed at you as well, unless you hold something outside it. So you acquire something outside it. And the most attractive candidate is the wealth of the ruling house you have just displaced, because it is the one large asset in the country whose seizure injures nobody whose loyalty you need.

Every step in that chain is forced by the one before it. Competent men in that position will find it, independently, in any century, and they did.

Which is what "history rhymes" actually means, stated mechanically rather than poetically: when the same solution appears in two places with no contact between them, you have found a constraint, not an influence. The rhyme is evidence about the shape of the problem. It is the closest thing this kind of study has to a controlled experiment, and it is why the collection compares cases that have nothing whatever to do with one another rather than cases in a lineage. Two dynasties in a tradition may share a practice because they copied it. Two dynasties that could not have copied it share it because the position left them nowhere else to go.

Where they diverged, and what it cost

Now the difference, which is not in the design but in one variable, and which may be worth more than the whole of the similarity.

The Umayyad second fisc drew on the same soil as the first. The Qing second fisc did not.

The *ṣawāfī* were land in the Sawad and its neighbouring regions, in the same provinces and often in the same districts as the tax-paying *fay'*. Every acre reclassified from tax-paying land into crown estate was an acre removed from the fund out of which the stipends were paid. Al-Yaʿqūbī's figures — unreliable as accounts, useful as magnitudes — put the crown-land yield under Muʿāwiya at around a hundred million dirhams against roughly a hundred and twenty million from the land tax of the Sawad and Kufa. Whatever the true ratio, the two streams were comparable in size and rivalrous in origin. The dynasty's private wealth grew at the conquest caste's expense, by an arithmetic that any man with access to a provincial ledger could perform.

The Imperial Household Department's revenue came principally from tariffs and the salt monopoly, from the luxury commodities of a conquered frontier, from moneylending, and from confiscations — and only marginally from land rents. Its money came from streams no bannerman had any claim on and no bannerman could compute. A Manchu soldier in a garrison quarter in Hangzhou, aggrieved about his stipend, had no way to formulate the sentence *the emperor is taking my pay*, because the emperor's private wealth was arriving from a customs house in Canton and a salt monopoly in Yangzhou, through officials the soldier had never heard of, into an account the Board of Revenue itself could not open.

Note what the Qing did with the asset that would have made their arrangement rivalrous. They confiscated the Ming imperial clan's princely estates — nominally three-quarters of a million *qing*, several times the entire banner enclosure — and did not keep them. They sold them off as taxable private property or rented them out as government land, converting the deposed house's patrimony into public revenue and, in the same motion, into a gift to the Chinese landowning class they needed. They took the previous apex's land and turned it into somebody else's title. Then they built their private fortune on commerce instead.

Whether the Qing chose that base for its safety, or arrived at it because the salt gabelle and the maritime customs were simply the richest things to hand, is not recoverable. What is recoverable is the structural result, and it can be stated as a rule.

A second fisc is safe in proportion to the distance between its revenue base and the first one's. Where the two draw on different streams, the arrangement is invisible to the people it disadvantages, and can run for centuries. Where they draw on the same stream, the arrangement is a subtraction that the injured party can calculate, and it becomes a standing grievance that requires no organiser, no leader and no doctrine that is not already the state's own.

The Umayyads ran the second version for ninety years in front of an audience of literate, armed, stipendiary men who spent those ninety years conducting their politics almost entirely as a quarrel about the register — and when the movement came that ended them, it was led by men who were *on* the register rather than by men who were under it.

Who could see it

Which brings us to the question of knowledge, and to a correction worth making carefully.

It is tempting to say that the apex understands and the common man does not. That is broadly true and it is imprecisely stated, and the imprecision hides the mechanism.

The cultivator in the Sawad and the peasant in Zhili were not stupid. They were *positioned* not to see. Neither could read a provincial ledger, neither had access to a treasury account, and neither would have gained anything by the knowledge if he had. **Information about the second book is distributed the same way standing is** — which is to say, it is available almost exactly to the people who are in a position to act on it, and to nobody else.

That is why the arrangement's danger is not measured by how well it is hidden from the population. It is measured by whether the men who *can* read a ledger are the men it is taking from.

In the Qing case they were not: the Han official who could have audited the Imperial Household Department had no claim on its revenues and no grievance about them, and the bannerman who had a grievance could not audit anything. The two capacities never met in one person.

In the Umayyad case they met constantly. The men on the *dīwān* were the same men who staffed and observed the provincial fiscal administration; the Kufan stipendiary and the Kufan clerk were frequently the same household. The state had built its settlement so that the people best placed to notice the subtraction were the people it was subtracted from.

This is the whole of it. Two dynasties in the same structural position found the same instrument, understood it equally well, and differed in one variable — and the one whose private wealth came out of its army's own fund was destroyed by an elite faction reciting the state's own doctrine back at it, while the one whose private wealth came out of the salt trade held an empire for two hundred and sixty-eight years and was finally undone by something else entirely.

Reading the two books against the framework

Bracket sincerity and read the arrangements. Nothing in this comparison required knowing what any of these men believed, and the finding is firmer for it. An inner state is unrecoverable; an arrangement is a decision that survives in the record. Where a study is tempted to vouch for a ruler's conviction — or, just as commonly, to deny it — it should ask instead what he built, who it advantaged, and whether the advantage runs the same direction in every particular. **Understanding is inferable from conduct. Belief is not, and does not need to be, because the two are independent: a man may hold his doctrine entirely and still know precisely what it is worth to him.**

The apex exempts itself from the instrument it uses on everyone else. Wherever a settlement pays its beneficiaries in revocable claims, look for what the payer holds — and expect it to be heritable, lightly assessed, and recorded somewhere the claim-holders' own auditors cannot reach.

Where an order keeps more than one treasury, establish whether the line between them is also a caste line, and read the unaudited one as the settlement's real terms. Both cases confirm it. In one the line ran between the Board of Revenue and the emperor's bondservants; in the other between the *dīwān al-ʿaṭā'* and the caliph's own estates.

And the diagnostic this comparison adds: measure the distance between the two treasuries' revenue bases. A second fisc fed by a different stream is a private fortune. A second fisc fed by the same stream is a subtraction, and subtraction is the one form of elite grievance that requires no ideology, no organiser and no lie — only a ledger and a man who can add.

Then, having established the distance, ask the second question: **do the capacity to read the ledger and the standing to be injured by it reside in the same person?** Where they do not, the arrangement is stable almost regardless of how unjust it is. Where they do, it is a countdown.

A note on sources. This essay makes no new factual claims and rests entirely on the two case studies it compares, each of which carries its own sources and its own cautions. The Umayyad material — 'Umar's refusal to divide the Sawad, the *fay'* doctrine, the *dīwān* organised by precedence in Islam, the recording of death dates in the Egyptian stipend registers, the *ṣawāfī* and the *qaṭā'iʿ* granted hereditably at the tithe rate, Muʿāwiya's enquiry after the Sasanian crown-land register, al-Yaʿqūbī's revenue

magnitudes, and the Syrian rural estates — is taken from the settlement module of the Umayyad study and carries that module's warnings in full, of which the most important is that almost the entire narrative tradition here comes through Abbasid-era juristic and historical writing whose authors had a live legal stake in what ʿUmar was held to have decided. The reported figures are a stable hierarchy carrying unstable numbers. The Qing material — the banner enclosures, the stipend rates, the Imperial Household Department's revenue sources and its insulation from the Board of Revenue's *zouxiao* audit, the confiscation and sale of the Ming princely estates, and the eighteenth-century expulsion of post-conquest Han bannermen — is taken from the settlement and extraction modules of the Qing study and carries those modules' warnings, of which the most important is that none of the Chinese instruments described was verified against an edition of its own text. Neither study consulted a source in the ruling caste's own language: the Qing study read no Manchu, and the Umayyad study's documentary evidence is Greek and Arabic papyri rather than anything from the Syrian court. Where this essay draws a conclusion the two studies did not — principally the proposition that a second fisc's danger varies with the distance between its revenue base and the first one's — the conclusion is new here and is offered to be broken by the next case that has two treasuries.